

“Shibboleth”
Judges 12:1-7
(Preached at Trinity, May 31, 2015)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. In **Chapter 11** we were introduced to Jephthah. He is described as a mighty warrior but the son of a harlot. He had been banished from the house of his brothers because of his illegitimacy. He had been stripped of his inheritance.
Judges 11:2 NAU - "they drove Jephthah out and said to him, "You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman."
 2. After being driven from Gilead Jephthah gathered around him a band of men referred to in **Verse 3** as worthless fellows. Apparently they became a marauding band of robbers.
 3. Being threatened by the Ammonites the Gileadites came bargaining with Jephthah. Jephthah basically tells them, "Restore my birthright and make me your chief and I'll lead you into battle."
 4. He was successful in the military campaign and the Ammonites were defeated. Sadly, however, this valiant warrior was also a sinful man. He made a vow before God that ultimately led to the sacrifice of his only child. Sin knows no bounds.
 5. The Book of Judges paints this vividly—sin knows no bounds. Remember, the Book of Judges describes Israel as a nation in decline. They have drifted further and further into sin, sin that continues to escalate and bear the worst consequences.
 6. Tonight we continue to focus on the aftermath of Jephthah's wonderful victory over the Ammonites. It was a victory from the hand of God as he was empowered by the Spirit of God. But sin often taints every earthly victory. We've seen Jephthah's sinful vow and, even worse, his carrying out the vow.
 7. The victory is further tainted by the rift between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites. This is our topic tonight as I direct your attention to the sinful attitudes of these two groups and how we are sometimes guilty of the same attitudes. May God grant us wisdom and discernment in our examination.
- I. First of all we need to see the sinful pride of the Ephraimites
- A. The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh held close ties
 1. They were both the descendants of the two sons of Joseph and were often jealous of one another.
 2. Ephraim settled on the west side of the Jordan. The tribe of Manasseh divided with half settling on the West side and the other half-tribe, along with the Reubenites and Gadites settled on the East-side.
 3. Ephraim had become strong and very prideful. They quarreled with Gideon of Manasseh on the West-side of the Jordan.
Judges 8:1 NAU - "Then the men of Ephraim said to him, "What is this thing you have done to us, not calling us when you went to fight against Midian?" And they contended with him vigorously."

4. Now in like-manner, they crossed the Jordan and quarreled with Jephthah who was of the Tribe of Manasseh on the East Side.
Judges 12:1 NAU - "Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you."
 5. While Gideon spoke kindly to Ephraim Jephthah was not as patient, especially as they spoke racial slurs against Gideon.
Judges 12:4 NAU - "Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought Ephraim; and the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, O Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim *and* in the midst of Manasseh."
"You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh."
- B. Ephraim's sin was the sin of pride and envy
1. Ephraim couldn't rejoice in the success of their brethren. It was a great display of jealousy and envy. They couldn't stand seeing the success of their brethren without sharing in it.
 2. It was unjustified anger. Their response should have been one of gratitude since Jephthah had defeated their common enemy. They should have rejoiced in the defeat of the Ammonites. They should have been working for a common purpose as God's people.
 3. It was also unjustified because apparently Jephthah *had* requested their help and they did not come.
Judges 12:2 NAU - "when I called you, you did not deliver me from their hand."
 4. Instead of gratitude and graciousness towards their brethren their response to the victory of Jephthah of Manasseh was murderous.
Judges 12:1 NAU - "We will burn your house down on you."
- C. On one hand we can sit back and view this as something that took place in antiquity. It doesn't really have anything to do with us.
1. But as usual, if we have any discernment, it smacks us with great relevance. It speaks right to our own heart.
 2. Do we become jealous of the success of other churches or other Christians?
 - a. On one hand we *should* be concerned over the health and wellbeing of our own church. God has united us to *this* church. I have been called as a pastor of *this* church and am responsible for *this* church. It is good for us to labor for the advancement of our own church. This is consistent with our covenant.
I promise by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together with this assembly in Christian love; to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, disciplines and doctrines. . .
 - b. On the other hand, we must never forget that we are laboring for a common cause—the same cause. We have been entrusted with the same Gospel.

- c. While it is true, when we are going door-to-door we invite people to *our* church, we are ultimately seeking to bring them the Gospel for the advancement of the Kingdom.
- D. The Gospel work is a shared labor
1. When we pass out tract at parades or other events our chief focus is the Gospel. If we are sharing the work with others it really doesn't matter who is more successful. Listen to Paul:
1 Corinthians 3:6-9 NAU - "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. ⁷ So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. ⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers"
 4. Paul's heart was for the Gospel to go forth
Philippians 1:15-18 NAU - "Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; ¹⁶ the latter *do it* out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷ the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice"
 5. No Christian labors alone – God has a work force. As we've gone door to door we've covered neighborhoods across our city. We once had a pastor become very angry with us because we were in the neighborhood of *his* church. Just like Ephraim and Manasseh should have been working towards the same goal so churches and Christians are working towards the same goal.
 6. We must guard our hearts against both pride and jealousy. God knows how to humble us. We should take note that the proud Ephraimites were so humbled as to deny that they were Ephraimites, even to though their speech gave them away.
- II. We also need to heed the lesson from the Shibboleth.
- A. After being horribly defeated the surviving Ephraimites wanted to cross the Jordan to return home.
1. The soldiers of Jephthah from the tribe of Manasseh wanted to kill every last one. This is really inconceivable knowing that they were kinsmen.
 2. They set up an immigration checkpoint and developed a plan to determine if the people crossing were Ephraimites. Living on opposite sides of the Jordan the Ephraimites had developed an accent. We've seen the same thing in our own nation. It would be hard for someone from Boston to hide his accent, or someone from Georgia or Texas.
 3. The Ephraimites could not make the "sh" sound so they put in place a sort of password—"shibboleth." Instead of shibboleth the Ephraimites pronounced it sibboleth. Anyone mispronouncing the word would be killed on the spot. This resulted in the death of 42,000 Ephraimites—all for the sake of a single letter.

4. At the risk of over-moralizing this terrible system which resulted in a huge loss of life, we should heed a lesson here. We too can be guilty of disregarding our brother for the sake of a single contrasting point of view.
- B. Christians often have difficulty discerning between essentials and non-essentials
1. There are essentials where we should be very exacting in our beliefs and practices.
 - a. This is where a historic confession of faith is helpful. Our church fully subscribes to each doctrine of the 1689 Confession.
 - b. Our beliefs regarding the Bible, the nature of God, and the work of Christ are inflexible.
 - c. Even as we hold tenaciously to the doctrines of orthodox Christianity, we recognize that the great proof that we are the disciples of Christ is found in our love for one another.
John 13:35 NAU - "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."
 - d. We preach the Gospel not only with our words but also with our actions.
Eph. 4:15 NAU - "but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ" It can be translated "speaking the truth" or "holding to the truth" or "maintaining truth." We speak sound doctrine and our lives are governed by sound doctrine, but we are always permeated with love.
 2. We must recognize that not every position we hold is a matter of law. The Christian life is granted a huge amount of flexibility. The Bible refers to it as liberty, as does our Confession:
Chapter 21: Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience
Paragraph 2:
"God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word, or not contained in it. So that to believe such doctrines, or obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also."
 - a. Baptist churches have long been guilty of breeches of liberty: drinking, dancing, card playing, length of hair or makeup.
 - b. Most of the time these things are sincere efforts at honoring God but they often expose an ignorance of God's Word or faulty hermeneutics in how they interpret God's Word or simply laziness in truly studying.
 3. Sometimes these sub-biblical points become absolute law. There have been cases where church discipline has resulted.
 4. Are your Shibboleths the result of a careful study of God's Word? Or are they points of needless division that you are willing to fight over?

- C. So how do we deal with the many areas where we are granted liberty?
1. You must recognize that just because your conscience is convicted doesn't automatically mean you should insist on everyone else conforming.
Romans 14:22 NAU - "The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves."
 2. We are all Pharisees by nature. We are all legalists. We love exactness. Lloyd-Jones called it a "morbid scrupulosity" But if we are going to be exact we had better make sure our consciences are rightly informed.
 3. People can acquire strict rules and regulations about how they think people should live and become very vocal with their opinions. They want everyone to follow *their* rules. They want to bind other men's consciences and condemn them when they don't conform. The Bible condemns such attitudes:
Romans 14:4 NAU - "Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand."
 4. If you allow your favorite non-essential issue to cause you to despise your brother you've missed the Kingdom. It takes large measures of love and patience to prevent us from becoming harsh and censorious.
 5. We must guard against the "Shibboleth." We must guard against assassinating our brother or sister over some small point that the Bible doesn't command.
Our Church Covenant:
"I promise to recognize my brother's and sister's liberty of conscience in Christ and not judge them in a thing not commanded by God."

Conclusion:

1. This takes great patience and love. We must guard our heart against envy and jealousy when our brother seems to be having greater success in the Gospel than us. Only God is able to judge our labors.
2. And we need to guard our hearts against the spirit of Shibboleth – of judging others based upon some small point that we have elevated above all others, especially when God has not made it a law. And even when it is a matter that the Bible *does* command it takes great wisdom and maturity to teach the weak without criticizing or condemning them.
3. And we must always guard against schisms and clicks within our church, especially as we grow. We must not have our own Shibboleths, our own tests of inclusion or exclusion—how will we decide who to fellowship with? Who will we invite to our homes? Who will we sit with during fellowship meals? I pray that as we grow we will become even more diverse, and yet I pray we will become even more inclusive.

May God grant us the humility to labor together, rejoicing over the successes of others and may we guard our hearts against a hard censorious spirit that divides rather than builds the body of Christ.